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checklist theory

semantic theory which presents the referential meaning of a linguistic sign in terms of features that constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions an object must satisfy to be a denotatum of the sign.

Checklisten-Theorie: semantische Theorie, die das Bezeichnungspotenzial von Sprachzeichen anhand von Merkmalen darstellt, die als notwendige und hinreichende Bedingungen ihrer Anwendung auf ein Denotat gelten.

Fillmore (1975: 123) characterises as *checklist theories* those semantic theories in which lexical meanings are broken up into components "that have to be satisfied in order for the form to be appropriately or truthfully used". This characterisation applies, for example, to *Lounsbury*'s (1964) outline of a componential "kinship semantics". *Fillmore* is critical of such accounts and contrasts them with alternative semantic theories based on the notions prototype and Frame, both foundational to the development of cognitive semantics from the 1970s onwards. *Fillmore* (1975) illustrates the major drawbacks of checklist theories by discussing a paper by *Labov* (1973) in which *Labov* explores the "boundaries" of the referential meanings of the words *cup, bowl, mug, glass* and *vase* on the basis of questionnaires. According to *Labov,* no sharp boundaries exist between the categories these lexical items refer to, which leads him to conclude that a rigid – according to *Labov*: Aristotelian – "categorical view" (1973: 369) cannot be sustained. In such a view, categories are discrete and meanings invariant, and the latter are said to be describable by means of a finite set of qualitatively different, atomic, and analytically necessary and

sufficient semantic features. In order to elucidate the process of categorisation, however, *Labov* still thinks that one has to accept an "invariant core" in the meaning potential of lexical items. *Fillmore* (1973: 128) strongly opposes this view and claims that the entire componential enterprise is misguided and should be abandoned. According to *Fillmore*, *Labov*'s experiment does not prove the existence of a "function that specifies the boundary conditions for a category" but rather shows that speakers categorise objects on the basis of prototypes – or, more accurately, the knowledge of "prototypic scenes" (*Fillmore* calls this a "strategy").

Since the 1980s, the term *checklist theories* is commonly used to refer critically to componential semantic analyses in general. However, this is partly based on a mistake, historically as well as factually. While the term is readily applicable to the "structural" accounts of referential meanings conducted in the 1950s and 1960s by anthropologists and ethnolinguists such as, among others, *Lounsbury*, *Goodenough*, and *Conklin*, it does not apply to other accounts which have also endorsed the componential framework, but are not concerned with denotation (or reference). Compare, in particular, the theory outlined by *Katz* and *Fodor* (1963) and the lexematic theory of meaning developed in Europe from the 1960s onwards. *Katz* and *Fodor* (1963) were not concerned with the relationship between the meaning and denotation of words but with the interpretation of lexical items as parts of sentences; their aim was to develop a generative (combinatorial) theory of sentence meaning. Lexematics, on the other hand, a theory of meaning initially conceived by *E. Coseriu*, *H. Geckeler* and their students in Germany and other European countries, centres around the analysis of lexical items of particular languages, probing into the paradigmatic and syntagmatic structures of *signifiés*, i.e. language-specific meanings in the sense of *Saussure*'s linguistic theory (cf. *Coseriu* 2000).

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